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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FIRST NATIONAL DIALOGUE SESSION MEETS LOW  
EXPECTATIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 1366

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1358

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Most participants characterized the first session of the re-launched National Dialogue as calm and positive; one contact said it was "more than a photo op, but less than a dialogue." Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah welcomed the dialogue, but insisted on expanded participation. By contrast, many political analysts and ordinary Lebanese citizens have decided to "wait and see" before passing judgment, with many noting that at a minimum, the dialogue reduced the immediate threat of widespread violence. Lebanese print and television media carried reports of the details of the closed session obtained by their sources. Paragraph 11 contains a summary of interventions by Dialogue participants at the session. Paragraph 12 is an unofficial translation of President Sleiman's opening remarks. End summary.

REACTION AND ATMOSPHERICS  
FROM DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS  
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[1](#)2. (C) Reactions to President Sleiman's September 16 National Dialogue launch were generally positive, although expectations were low to begin with. Progressive Socialist Party and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told the Ambassador September 17 that the mood of the dialogue was calm. However, many in the opposition continued to call for an expanded agenda and participation in an attempt to detract attention away from the central issue, Hizballah's arms (Ref A).

[1](#)3. (C) Christian MP and March 14 member Boutros Harb commented on September 16 that the atmosphere inside the conference room was good and positive. He said Michel Aoun defended the resistance (Hizballah) and asked to expand the number of participants in the dialogue. Hizballah MP Mohammad Raad asked to add more topics to the dialogue's agenda, Harb reported. However, both proposals were opposed by March 14. In the end, the issue of expanding the number of participants was deferred to President Sleiman to make a final decision, Harb said.



¶4. (C) Armenian MP Hagop Pakradunian described the September 16 meeting as "more than a photo op, but less than a dialogue." During the closed session, he said, President Sleiman stressed the need for domestic reconciliation to pave the way for the Lebanese Armed Forces to withdraw troops from the streets of Beirut and other areas and focus, instead, on disarming the Palestinian camps. Pakradunian disclosed that Sleiman also is working to secure a meeting between Hizballah Secretary General (SYG) Hassan Nasrallah and March 14 and Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri. According to Pakradunian, Sleiman noted that there was a consensus in the government's ministerial statement in August regarding the resistance. This prompted Amine Gemayel to recall that some parliamentarians had expressed reservations to the statement with their vote. Pakradunian also reported that Hariri called for a solution to the daily clashes occurring in various towns throughout Lebanon and for removing all types of provocative emblems, including pictures and slogans of political parties, from Beirut streets.

¶5. (C) Opposition Zahle bloc leader and Minister of Agriculture Elie Skaff reported that Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea opposed expanding the number of dialogue participants by saying, "If March 8 wants to enlarge the table, then March 14 should also add participants to include (March 14 Christians) Nayla Mouawad and Michel Pharon." Skaff believed Geagea's objections were designed to discourage Geagea's Christian rival and Hizballah ally Suleiman Franjeh from being allowed to join the talks.

¶6. (C) State Minister Nassib Lahoud, although not a

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participant in the talks, applauded President Sleiman's opening remarks, saying that he appreciated Sleiman's prioritization of the national defense strategy. Reporting that Skaff had tried to add discussion of the role of the GOL's Council for Development and Reconstruction to the agenda, Lahoud concluded that the opposition is attempting to draw focus away from the defense strategy by flooding the agenda with irrelevant items (septel).

HIZBALLAH REPEATS CALL  
FOR EXPANDED PARTICIPATION  
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¶7. (SBU) In remarks made during a September 16 iftar and reported in the media, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah welcomed the National Dialogue and insisted on expanding the participation. He explained that some parties were loyal to Hizballah during the July 2006 war and he is now insisting on their participation because "we are loyal to them." He added, "When everyone is present, we will be able to discuss all controversial issues seriously and positively." However, Hizballah MP Mohammed Raad, a participant in the talks, clarified that this is a "suggestion and not a condition."

¶8. (C) Druze MP Akram Shuhayyeb, also a close aide of Walid Jumblatt, told Pol/Econ Chief September 16 that Hizballah's strategy is to use delaying tactics, such as calling for expanded participation and additional agenda items, to prevent the dialogue participants from discussing the primary issue, Hizballah's weapons. Shuhayyeb theorized that Hizballah wanted to water down the National Dialogue until after the 2009 parliamentary elections because, he believed, Hizballah wants to gather support for its cause from across the confessional spectrum.

¶9. (C) March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid said Hizballah is buying time. However, he believed Hizballah's delaying tactics would last until after the U.S. elections and until he gets a clearer picture of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

ORDINARY CITIZENS  
REMAIN SKEPTICAL  
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¶10. (SBU) While most political figures praised the start of the National Dialogue, political observers and ordinary citizens were less effusive in their commentary. One political analyst was quoted as saying, "Of course it's a good thing that people are talking instead of shooting each other, but ultimately it's all dancing in a circle." Furthermore, he asserted that peace in Lebanon was contingent upon resolving other regional crises. Similarly, the BBC Beirut office published an interview with several young people who were either apathetic or resigned to continued conflict. One interviewee said Nasrallah was the only politician with a "vision."

DETAILS OF THE CLOSED SESSION,  
ACCORDING TO PRESS SOURCES  
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¶11. (U) All major Lebanese print and media outlets provided extensive coverage and analysis September 16 following the conclusion of the first session of the National Dialogue:

-- Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri emphasized the importance of dialogue and noted that priority should be given to the defense strategy. During the closed session, Berri reportedly presented a detailed report on the results of the former National Dialogue sessions held in 2006.

-- Former president Amine Gemayel reportedly gave a lengthy presentation about the definition of "sovereignty" and Lebanese history since 1958. Prior to the start of the talks, Gemayel distributed a book commemorating his assassinated son, Pierre Gemayel, to participants in honor of Pierre's participation during the 2006 dialogue.

-- Prime Minister Fouad Siniora discussed the present security situation and foreign interference in Lebanon. In

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addition, Siniora said the dialogue should give priority to economic issues.

-- Free Patriotic Movement founder and opposition leader Michel Aoun said the defense strategy should contain two parts: political and technical issues. He also raised the issue of terrorism, discussed the capabilities of the LAF, and the status of the information bureau at the Internal Security Forces (ISF) (seen as close to majority leader Saad Hariri).

-- MP Michel Murr suggested that the LAF should present its views on the defense strategy to dialogue participants. However, Murr's suggestion was rebuked by participants' remarks that the policy is the responsibility of the political authorities, and the LAF should prepare a strategy that meets the policy's needs. (Note: Jumblatt confirmed this in his September 17 meeting with the Ambassador (Ref A). End note.)

-- Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammad Safadi expressed concern to dialogue participants of the danger unnamed "forces" were causing by inciting strife between Sunni and Shia populations.

UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION  
OF SLEIMAN'S REMARKS  
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¶12. The unofficial embassy translation of President Sleiman's opening remarks is as follows:

BEGIN TRANSLATION:  
Dear Gentlemen,

We meet today to launch again a dialogue which we have always wanted to start, and which we have always realized the nation



has a desperate need for it to be successful; and, which we realize the citizens eagerness for it to reach an outcome that would bring them back what they have been missing for a long time which is political stability, economic prosperity, and social safety.

Our meeting is a milestone in which we open a new window towards holding a calm dialogue, based on deep-rooted democratic experience of which dialogue was one of its most prominent practices. Dialogue and democracy are twins, both based on discussion and debate, and on recognizing and respecting another's opinion. I find myself believing that reconciliation between parties involved in dialogue is the other side that compliments dialogue. Openness and reconciliation lead to consensus on what ensures building a strong state, and commitment to democratic practices. All this will lead to affirming and strengthening the state's ability to manage its own affairs.

Our national responsibility requires us not to accept any substitute for accomplishment in these agreements, which are our path to a good life. Other alternatives ) contrary to agreements - call for serious concern and fear for the future. Agreements deserve (for us) to pause and think carefully then, and we should take initiatives by making concessions and accepting sacrifices even if painful. Concessions are not presented to one another by parties involved in dialogue, but are a sacrifice made for the sake of this nation's pride and dignity.

Our role becomes clear and our responsibility becomes confirmed when we look around us: Tensed political atmospheres have gone beyond our region and are warning us of international tensions, which if continued, are expected to lead to...polarizations. We are a small and a diverse country that must be united and in solidarity during the good and the bad times ) perhaps, it may succeed in avoiding the possible effect of the wind if it blows. For us and for you, harsh past experiences are the best proof.

Dear Honored (Lebanese) People,

The Lebanese National Dialogue Conference, called for by the

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Speaker of the House in 2006, was able to reach a consensus on several issues. This was an appreciated and commendable achievement which requires going ahead with implementation. We must admit that your National Dialogue Sessions are the reason for what we are embarking upon today. We must also highly appreciate the auspices of the Arab League in the person of its Secretary General Amr Moussa and the efforts exerted by the Arab Foreign Ministers Committee that was crowned by the decisions reached in Doha sponsored by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. Today we launch the mechanism of resuming the Lebanese National Dialogue.

Various parties think that the issue of the Defense Strategy for Lebanon should be discussed. The strategy is a comprehensive title that discusses major options and long-term plans. It deals with the various state resources mobilizing in order to reach the desired objectives. Many have suggested discussion of other topics in conjunction with this strategy. I think that our first task is to come up with a general scenario for this dialogue in form and content. Accepting dialogue in itself means that nothing is closed, but that various topics are likely to be discussed and subject to reaching a consensus. The only impermissible thing is failure or reaching a dead end.

Dear Honored People,

Major risks still threaten this beloved homeland, and we all agree that Israel remains the biggest source of danger to us.

Israel does not hesitate to announce its hostile intentions towards us, and threaten to strike our institutions and our



national establishments, which confirms its insistence on aggression and making light of international legitimacy and UN resolutions and UN forces operating in the south. Not to mention its continued occupation of parts of our territory in the Sheba'a Farms, Kfarshouba Hills and the northern part of the Ghajar village and its continued denial of the Palestinian refugees of their legitimate rights.

Given this reality, and based on Lebanon's right, "people, army and resistance," to defend their land, we must develop a strategy integrating all the strong elements in the state, and which falls under the state's definition of defending its territory within the framework of the country's general policy. I am fully confident that we can develop a strategy to protect Lebanon that is based on our armed forces, and benefits from the capabilities and energies of the resistance. Let us discuss the elements of strength that we have and let us integrate our capabilities, including diplomacy. Let Lebanon's message and diversity become fruitful so we achieve through dialogue consensus and unity and approach such a fateful issue with united views.

In the recent period, favorable conditions and external factors were present. We can build upon these factors during the dialogue sessions, particularly through the Syrian-Lebanese Summit. The joint Lebanese-Syrian statement that followed the summit can be a basis that should be followed up. It establishes a valid ground for fortifying our abilities, and promotes elements of strength that are available in both countries. We will follow up on this quest to confirm Lebanon's rights and defend its supreme interests, through our presence in upcoming international forums, and through the mutual visits that were made, and the visits that are being prepared for.

The next parliamentary elections are waiting for us in the near future. Elections are a central component of our freedom and democracy, and a fundamental milestone in the process of building the sovereign state. Achieving these elections in the best way possible signifies our ability to manage our affairs ourselves. I think that the atmosphere which will be created by dialogue will push those concerned to ratify the election law as soon as possible, and move forward to prepare all necessary measures to complete these elections on time.

To be realistic, we have to acknowledge the difficulties and dangers that are obstructing our march. Whenever we progress on the path towards calm and stability, those affected

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negatively seek to fabricate tension and create chaos. Whenever we succeed in overcoming differences and hold reconciliations, forces of evil work on punishing the brave who worked on these reconciliations. In this context, as soon as we launched dialogue, the Baisour murder occurred and one of those brave people was punished. But the winds of reconciliation have blown and harvested yesterday Khaldeh,s meeting. The hands of treachery, crime, were not able to do anything. Let us take advantage of the favorable wind. The crime is an act by Lebanon's enemies. We can only confront Lebanon's enemies with such will to hold a dialogue and with courage to reach reconciliation.

The national goals we are seeking as an outcome of this dialogue will remain subject to great dangers. It should be monitored by the media and by parties in the dialogue with responsibility, and with a healthy media atmosphere that separates clearly between the sanctity of the freedom of expression and the chaos of exchanges through media outlets. Pleasing results may not start to appear early. The atmosphere of frankness and talking about obsessions may suggest that dialogue is going towards a deadlock... In this context we consider that all Lebanese media outlets should embrace the National Dialogue away from sectarian tension. We only see the media outlets committed to the laws and



professional practices, and seeking to promote reconciliation and national unity.

I chose to have the dialogue in the "Independence Hall," the Hall of November 22. The symbolism of this room urges us to strengthen the march of independence, and stabilize the pillars of reconciliation based on the Constitution and the National Accord document emanating from the Ta'if Agreement.

Lebanon, Gentlemen, the meeting place of civilizations has been distinguished by extraordinary pluralism, which gave it its uniqueness. It became a prominent example that plays an effective role in its Arab context and the international community as a vivid illustration of the coexistence of cultures. This is how Lebanon was, and this is how it should stay. Our homeland lives on the culture of dialogue and we must give, and be, the example. End translation.  
SISON